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Kottler

The high point, and the end, of my training with Miss Mannebach came with my performance of the Beethoven Third Concerto with a hired orchestra made up of most of the members of the Detroit Symphony. It was in the spring of 1945, I was fifteen. It went very well; except that as always during a recital, my nightmare, there came a moment when my mind went blank as to what notes came next, I stopped, couldn't continue, then went back to an earlier break and started again, hoping but not knowing that my fingers and my memory would carry me through this time, as they did.

Could this really have happened, was it a dream? Yes, it did happen, in front of the orchestra and the conductor and the audience...but in fact it didn't amount to much, because it happened during the cadenza when I was playing alone. I started the cadenza again and played it through.

If the orchestra had been playing when I lost track so that I couldn't go back...what? I couldn't have repeated. Would they have gone on with the piano silent, my hands poised over the keys, waiting for something to come back to me, waiting for an opening to join them, till the end of the movement? Would the conductor have stopped, told them to go back...to where? Without music in front

of me to refer to, how could we have coordinated? Ahhrgh...but that didn't occur. I was judicious, I chose the cadenza to black out. Probably the audience hardly remembered the incident at the end of the performance, when I got a standing ovation, from all my parents' friends, and the conductor congratulated me.

It was after that that my mother took me to be auditioned by a new teacher, Mischa Kottler. He was the musical director of a major radio station in Detroit and he frequently concertized. Mother thought we had gone as far with Miss Mannebach as she was likely to take me, and it was time to prepare more professionally for a music school and a concert career.

Mother didn't tell me where the money was to come from for these lessons, which would be very much expensive than Miss Mannebach's, but it was 1946, after the war, and Dad was earning a big salary for the first time in his life. [He was chief structural engineer on what was the largest engineering project in the world that year: the buildup of the atomic energy installations at Hanford, Washington. Another story...] In fact, I think that Cranbrook had asked him to start contributing to my tuition, reducing my full scholarship, because of his new ability to pay. So lessons wouldn't depend on Aunt Clara and Uncle Lou any more.

Kottler lived and taught in a large house with beautiful rugs, art objects, bookshelves of art books and scores. His piano was a

concert grand, in a large livingroom. Very different from Miss Mannebach's little studio. Kottler himself was round, without much hair on a round head and with a warm smile. His hands looked soft and slightly pudgy, somewhat feminine, not heroic, but, I learned later when he demonstrated different touches on my forearm, there was iron strength under the flesh.

He used a very different hand position from what I had learned under Miss Mannebach, more relaxed and curved, close to the keyboard. One could hardly see his fingers move separately as his hands, like paws, glided back and forth across the keys spilling silken runs and arpeggios. But that was later, as he demonstrated passages for me in my lessons.

On this first meeting, he was to decide whether he would take me on as a student. Money wasn't enough, he had to judge my ability. I had brought much of my music with me, volumes of Chopin Waltzes and Preludes, Beethoven sonatas, Bach, Schumann, so I could show him in the indices which ones I knew. He questioned me on my training and my repertoire. He listened closely as I played pieces he picked out, nodded appreciatively. I thought it had gone well.

At the end he said, "You're a talented pianist. Your technique is very good. You have a good tone, very good feeling, your playing is very musical. But I won't take you on the understanding that you are preparing for a concert career. You

don't have the right preparation for that, and it's too late to acquire it."

It was a matter of repertoire, he said. Mine was entirely too limited. "You know half a dozen Beethoven sonatas," he said. "You should know all of them, or at least have read through them. You should know half a dozen concertos, not just two." (I had learned a Mozart concerto in addition to the Beethoven Third).

Pointing to the volumes I had brought he said, "You should know all this Chopin, all the Bach, not just a dozen pieces. Or you should at least have played them through. You should be able to sight-read them. But you haven't learned to sight-read" (as I had told him, when he questioned me). "That's the trouble, right there. And it's too late for you to learn. You could never catch up. Even in college. You couldn't acquire the repertoire you ought to have by this time."

This was staggering news. It came out of nowhere, after ten years of total commitment, apparently misdirected. He was saying that the decade spent practicing, each year, a handful of pieces for a recital, learning each note by note, perfectly, no mistakes, for eventual performance, had been entirely misplaced. "You shouldn't have been preparing for recitals at all. To prepare you for a serious career, you should have been learning to sight-read, learning harmony, expanding your range, reading through a whole

library of music..."

Kottler spoke with total authority, firmly and confidently. He didn't want to leave any false hopes. He was talking about an aspect of the profession that we had heard nothing about, never considered or discussed, speaking with a finality that seemed to leave no room for argument, not with him anyway. We had, it seemed, been conned, up till this moment. It was as if I were being informed as an actor that I was, after all, the wrong gender or race to play the roles I had trained for and rehearsed with an earlier teacher.

"You're already a good pianist," Kottler said. "I would be happy to take you on a student, to learn to play better for your own enjoyment. But only on that understanding. You have no prospect for a concert career, and I wouldn't be training you for that."

Mother looked glum, but said nothing. My own enjoyment? That was not my calling, that was scarcely even related what I had been preparing for (since the womb, I was later to learn). I had just heard, in the space of two or three minutes, that the single goal I had been pursuing for two-thirds of my life was closed off to me, it had been an illusion for years, the hours of practicing each day had been misspent. I couldn't be what I had learned from my earliest years I was destined to be, the only thing on earth it

mattered for me to be. I was free.

I said I thought I would still like to study with him, on that understanding. I was looking at Mother, who was not giving much sign of reaction. He told us to think it over and let him know. We shook hands and left. In the car on the way home Mother and I agreed that he seemed very professional and would be a good teacher for me. It was settled that I would make an appointment to begin lessons with him.

It is astonishing for me to look back on this. I was leaving a concert career behind, a week or two after I had performed a concerto with a symphony orchestra. Actually, Kottler's judgement on repertoire and sight-reading, from a perspective of fifty years, looks quirky, peculiar. Why couldn't I have learned sight-reading starting at fifteen, why was it too late to read through a broad repertoire?

So said a teacher, a first-rate professional, I went back to for some months forty years later. My technique was very good, he said, and my musical sense. "You could play anything you wanted," he said. A concert career was not out of my reach at all, if I'd wanted it enough. (Not, presumably, at the very top ranks. I didn't press him on this, on just how good I might have become. But I was no virtuoso. However, he contradicted my impression that only a half-dozen or so pianists could make a living as

performers.)

What is astonishing is that neither Mother nor I, with Kottler or between ourselves, challenged his judgment. We didn't argue, we didn't look for a second opinion. There was enough plausibility in what he had said about my training to make it unlikely that we would have stayed on with Miss Mannebach. But nothing could have been more natural than for me to say, "That's absurd! Of course I can learn to sight-read, if that's what's required! If you're not willing to take me on, if you won't give me what I need, we'll find someone who will."

"Come on, Mother," I can hear myself saying, taking her arm, "let's get out of here! Thank you, Mr. Kottler." On second thought, it's fantasy that I would have said that to him, at fifteen. But what could have been expected, by Mother at least, is that I would have thought it, and said it to her in the car as soon as we had left.

I would have said it forcefully, confidently, because she could be expected to be crestfallen, uncertain about my reaction and the future. I had just been humiliated in front of her, though in effect we had both been, by his judgment on the decade of lessons she had taken me to. She would need reassurance, what she needed to hear was not unclear.

And I didn't say it, any of it. What is even more astonishing is that she didn't either. ...